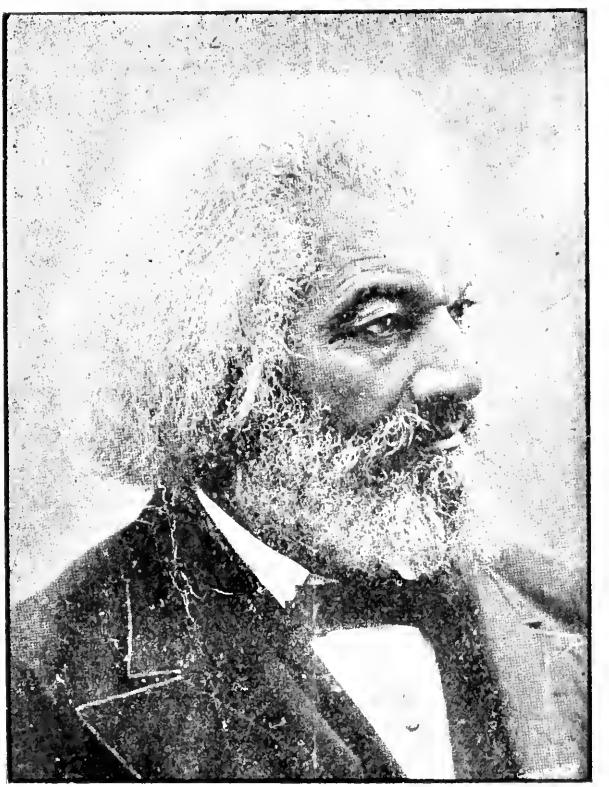
FREDERICK DOUGLASS

A NARRATIVE



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Frederick Douglass: A Narrative

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THE life of Frederick Douglass reads like a romance, at times almost tragic in its development. Born on the forsaken Eastern Shore of Maryland, the exact date of his birth unknown to him, born a slave and suffering all which that condition entailed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, he lived to gain the respect of the whole enlightened world and the admiration and friendship of rulers of the earth.

His mother, having nothing else to bestow upon him, started him off in life with the resounding cognomen of Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. This name has companions soon shortened to "Gus. Bailey," and by the latter title he was known for some years. While still very young, he was separated from his mother, and his earliest recollections of her were that she would often steal from the plantation where she worked, miles away, and would come to see him in the middle of the night. She died while her beloved son was still very young.

At an early age Frederick was sent to Baltimore, loaned as a companion and playmate for little Tommy Auld, son of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Auld, relations-in-law to Col. Anthony who was Fred's real owner; he remained with the Aulds seven years. While Hugh Auld was, at the worst, antagonistic to little Fred and at the best indifferent, his wife, Sophia, was friendly, even tender to the motherless slave child. Mrs. Auld taught him the rudiments of reading and was very proud of his aptness, but when her husband discovered what she was about he sternly forbade her to continue.

When about sixteen years old, because of a disagreement between Hugh and Thomas Auld, the latter of whom was now his owner, Frederick was sent to work with other slaves on the farm of Edward Covey, notorious as a "Negro-breaker." It was here that Fred made his first resistance against the system of slavery. Covey, the overseer, had often beaten him most brutally, but at the end of six months Frederick determined that he should not do so again. So vigorously did he protect himself by overpowering and frightening Covey that the latter did not again dare to attack him. In 1836 in company with some other slaves he made an attempt to escape from slavery. They were caught and Frederick was once more sent to Hugh Auld in Baltimore.

Tired of the humiliations and vicissitudes of slavery, he determined in 1838 to make another bold stroke for freedom, this time alone. He borrowed a "Sailor's Protection" (of equal value to a "free paper") from a sea-faring friend, dressed himself in sailor fashion and boarded the train to Philadelphia. His calm and dignified deportment, in spite of inward trepidation, stood him in good stead; three times he was in danger of being recognized but he succeeded in reaching the Quaker City unmolested. He went on to New York the same night, September 3rd, 1838, and found there a measure of the freedom for which his soul longed.

Fortunately he came under the protection of Mr. David Ruggles, the Underground Railroad worker, who gave him shelter and from whose home he sent for his intended wife, Miss Anna Murray, a free woman of Baltimore. They were married by the Rev. J. W. C. Pennington, a noted Presbyterian divine of the day. Frederick Bailey was at that time an expert ship's calker, and upon the advice of friends he at once took his bride to New Bedford where there were many opportunities for plying his trade. Here he found in Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Johnson kind and true friends of his own race. At Mr. Johnson's suggestion he changed the name of Bailey for that of Douglass of which character Mr. Johnson had just been reading in Sir Walter Scott's "Lady of the Lake." Douglass selected February 14, 1818, as his birthday.

The white workmen threatened to strike if he was employed with them at his trade of calker, so Douglass was forced to earn a livelihood at whatever came to hand. In his own words he "sawed wood, shoveled coal, dug cellars, moved rubbish from back yards, worked on the wharves, loaded and unloaded vessels and scoured their cabins." His first job in his free estate was to put away a large pile of coal for the wife of the distinguished Unitarian minister, Rev. Ephraim Peabody. Humble as were these occupations, the newly-freed man worked at them gladly, for his time, his labor, his money were now his own. After this he found a better-paying grade of employment in an oil factory, then in a brass foundry.

About this time Douglass was given a copy of the *Liberator*, the Abolitionist paper of which William Lloyd Garrison was editor, and shortly after this attended a lecture by Garrison at Liberty Hall. Here he heard enunciated for the first time the thoughts and ideals which for years had been surging within him; naturally his delight was unbounded.

In 1839, Edwin Thompson, another noted Abolitionst, traveled through Massachusetts making speeches in the anti-slavery cause. Mr. Douglass was present at one of these meetings held in New Bedford, and some years afterward said that after Garrison it

was Thompson who waked him up on the subject and by quoting some of Whittier's poems, inspired him and made him feel, indeed, a new man. In 1844, Mr. Douglass was, after much begging and persuasion, induced to relate to the congregation of the Rev. Thomas James—himself an ex-slave—the story of his experience in slavery. This was his first public talk, and though his audience was small and humble, it is said he was very nervous and ill at ease. This man who was destined to stir the world by his oratory, was at first overcome by timidity at the thought of addressing an audience of his own people.

William C. Coffin was present at this meeting. Later at a large anti-slavery convention held in Nantucket Mr. Coffin sought Douglass out and prevailed upon him to address the convention. Of this occasion Mr. Douglass says, "It was with the utmost difficulty that I could stand erect or that I could command and articulate two words without hesitation and stammering. I trembled in every limb. I am not sure that my embarrassment was not the most effective part of my speech, if speech it could be called. Mr. Garrison followed me, taking me as his text. And now, whether I had made an eloquent plea in behalf of freedom or not, his was one never to be forgotten. Those who had heard him oftenest and had known him longest were astonished at his masterly effort." The result of that meeting was that Douglass was employed as a traveling agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society to solicit subscriptions to the *Liberator* and the *Anti-Slavery Standard*. He addressed many large meetings, and as he was brought to realize his possession of the divine gift of oratory, he went from triumph to triumph.

Like water seeking its level, he made one acquaintance after another among the enlightened, broadminded, cultured people of Massachusetts; for people of that caliber were the only ones who were capable of appreciating him. He consorted with the noble company who were working for the overthrow of slavery—Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Owen Lovejoy, and many others; and since he realized that the love of freedom is not bounded by sex, he threw his support also to the cause of equal suffrage, and was the friend of such noble women as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, the Grimke sisters, Susan B. Anthony and a host of others.

It is interesting to note that about this time, the "Jim Crow" car law was in full force in Massachusetts and colored persons were forced to travel in a rough car with hard seats, much as in the case in the Southern States today. Those who protested against this and entered other cars, were thrown off. While the colored

people generally accepted this condition, Mr. Douglass had many altercations with conductors and brakemen; but his own people complained of him as making matters worse instead of better by refusing to submit to this proscription. He, however, persisted and sometimes was soundly beaten. On one occasion, in Lynn, several seats were broken in trying to get him out as he had become "so much attached" to his place. The outcome of that occurence was that the Abolitionists took up the fight against the "Jim-Crow" car and did not cease until the abominations were removed from New England.

This brings to mind a story told of Mr. Douglass and the Jim-Crow cars of the South.

It is said that on a certain occasion he had an engagement to lecture in a southern city and toward the end of his journey was compelled to use the section reserved for colored people, which in this case was an end of a freight car. This, it will easily be understood, was particularly obnoxious, and when the delegation which went to meet him saw him in such surroundings they began to apologize that coming to them had caused him to be so humiliated and degraded. Drawing himself up to his full height, the grand old man replied, "Gentlemen, by ignoble actions I may degrade myself, but *nothing and no man can degrade Frederick Douglass.*" Those words should never be forgotten, for the lesson they teach is worthy of imitation by all. Be master of your soul, do nothing that is ignoble and whenever an attempt is made to embarrass or humiliate you, you will be able to treat it with the contempt it deserves.

In 1845 Mr. Douglass went to Europe to lecture on slavery; on the trip over he was not allowed a first cabin berth. As the ship neared her journey's end, the captain gave to the first cabin passengers a complimentary dinner, after which some of the passengers, knowing of Douglass' presence on board, desired to hear him speak. As soon as he began a great uproar was started by those who at heart were slaveholders, and there were loud cries of "Kill him," "Throw him overboard," and for a time he was in great danger. The captain, however, took his part, and invited those who did not wish to hear Douglass to leave the dining saloon, threatening that if the speaker was again interrupted, every one of the disturbers should be put in irons. Douglass then went on and delivered one of his most telling speeches.

Upon his arrival in England his lectures upon slavery were delivered to large audiences and won for himself and for his cause many friends. A purse of $750 was made up by his English friends to purchase his liberty, and he returned to this country a free man.

In 1847 he began the publication of a newspaper, "The North Star," in Rochester, N. Y., and the paper was widely read by lovers of liberty. It ran several years. While living in Rochester his little daughter, Rosetta, applied for admission to the public schools, but was denied on account of color. Mr. Douglass at once began to fight the silly prejudice and did not rest until "every door of the public schools of Rochester not only swung wide open to the admission of his own children, but to every child of every race."

Mr. Douglass had become an intimate friend of John Brown, and in 1859 a dispatch was sent to the sheriff of Philadelphia, where Mr. Douglass was at the time, to arrest him for complicity in the John Brown raid. The telegraph operator, being a friend of Douglass, held up the dispatch and left his office in search of Douglass' friends, advising them to hurry the latter out of the country. This they did, and the dispatch was not delivered until Douglass was well on the way to Rochester. He reached home in safety, went over into Canada, thence to Europe where he remained until danger was over.

At the beginning of the Civil War he returned to this country and helped persuade President Lincoln to arm the Negroes; the colored regiments of Massachusetts were raised with his active assistance, his sons becoming members of the famous 54th Massachusetts Volunteers.

Long after the Civil War Mr. Douglass told the following story of his life to the pupils of a colored school in Talbot County, Maryland, the county in which he was born: "I once knew a little colored boy whose father and mother died when he was six years old. He was a slave and had no one to care for him. He slept on a dirt floor in a hovel, and in cold weather would crawl into a meal bag, head-foremost, and leave his feet in the ashes to keep them warm. Often he would roast an ear of corn and eat it to satisfy his hunger, and many times has he crawled under the barn or stable and secured eggs, which he would roast in the fire and eat.

"This boy did not wear pants like you do, but a tow linen shirt. Schools were unknown to him, and he learned to spell from an old Webster's spelling book, and to read and write from posters on cellars and barn doors, while boys and men would help him. He would then preach and speak, and soon became well known. He finally held several high positions and accumulated some wealth. He wore broadcloth and did not have to divide crumbs with the dogs under the table. That boy was Frederick Douglass.

"What was possible for me is possible for you. Do not think because you are colored you cannot accomplish anything. Strive earnestly to add to your knowledge. So long as you remain in

ignorance, so long will you fail to command the respect of your fellowmen."

In September, 1870, Douglass became the editor of the *New National Era* at Washington, which was continued by his sons, Lewis and Frederick.

Besides his splendid work in other directions, Mr. Douglass held several public positions of honor and trust. In 1871 he was appointed assistant secretary to the Commission to San Domingo; upon finishing that task he was appointed a member of the Upper House of the Territorial Legislature of the District of Columbia, which he had previously chosen for his permanent home. In 1872 he was presidential elector-at-large for the state of New York; he was successively appointed United States Marshal for the District of Columbia, Recorder of Deeds for the same place, and U. S. Minister to Haiti. The sympathy and insight which he showed for the people of that Republic endeared him to them and his memory is held in greatest reverence by all patriotic Haitians. Mr. Douglass was married in 1884 to Miss Helen Pitts.

Mr. Douglass died at his home, Cedar Hill, Anacostia, D. C., February 20th, 1895, at the age of seventy-seven. An immense throng attended the funeral services held in Metropolitan A. M. E. Church, Washington, and many glowing tributes were paid to his worth. Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton sent a letter which was read by Miss Susan B. Anthony. The following is an extract: "I saw Mr. Douglass first before a Boston audience, when he was fresh from the land of bondage. He stood there like an African prince, conscious of his dignity and power, grand in his physical proportions, majestic in his wrath, as with keen wit, satire and indignation he portrayed the bitterness of slavery, the humiliation of having been subject to those who in all human virtues and capabilities were inferior to himself. His denunciation of our national crime, of the wild and guilty fantasy that men could hold property in man—poured like a torrent that fairly made his hearers tremble.

"Thus I first saw him and wondered as I listened that any mortal man should have ever tried to subjugate a being with such marvelous powers, such self-respect, such intense love of liberty. Around him sat the great anti-slavery orators of the day, watching his effect on that immense audience, completely magnetized with his eloquence, laughing and crying by turns with his rapid flights from pathos to humor. All other speakers seemed tame after Douglass. Sitting near I heard Wendell Phillips say to Lydia Maria Child, 'Verily, this boy, who has only just graduated from slavery, throws us all in the shade.' 'Ah,' she replied, 'the iron has entered his soul and he knows the wrongs of slavery subjectively; the rest of you speak only from an objective point of view."

Due to the untiring efforts of the widow of Frederick Douglass, Mrs. Helen Pitts Douglass, and after many disappointments and discouragements, the Douglass Memorial and Historical Association was chartered by Congress in 1900. It was the most ardent desire of Mrs. Douglass' heart that Cedar Hill should become as dear to the colored people as is Mt. Vernon to all America. Over and often she discussed this matter with the writer, and on one occasion she said, "Oh, that I could make the people realize that there was never in the history of the whole world such a man as Frederick Douglass and that there never can be his like again. If every colored person in America would give but one penny each Cedar Hill could be made a fitting memorial to him."

GEMS OF THOUGHT

From "*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*"

"Conscience cannot stand too much violence; once thoroughly injured, who is he who can repair the damage?"

"Freedom of choice is the essence of accountability."

"The feeling of the nation must be quickened, the conscience of the nation must be aroused."

"The secret of all oppression is in the pride, the power and the avarice of man."

"Sorrow and desolation have their songs as well as peace and joy."

"Life is not lightly regarded by men of sane minds."

"Such is the power of public opinion that it is hard even for the innocent to feel the happy consolation of innocence when they fall under the maledictions of this power."

"It is not a bad thing to have individuals or nations do right though they do it from selfish motives."

"Mr. Lincoln was not only a great President, but a great man—too great to be small in anything."

"A man's head will not long remain wrong when his heart is right."

"If the Negro knows enough to fight for his country, he knows enough to vote; if he knows enough to pay taxes for the support of the government, he knows enough to vote."

"I will continue to pray, labor and wait, believing that America cannot always be insensible to the dictates of justice or deaf to the voice of humanity."

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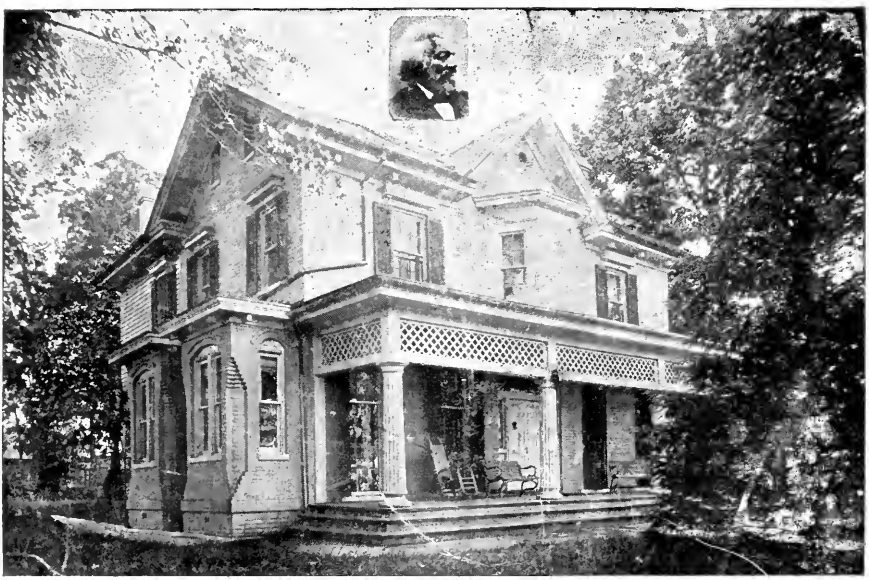

CEDAR HILL, ANACOSTIA, D. C.

THE HOME OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

THE INDEBTEDNESS UPON WHICH WAS PAID IN 1919, BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORED WOMEN, OF WHICH MRS. MARY B. TALBERT WAS THEN PRESIDENT.